

[Southern Customs]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 228 West 22nd St., New York

DATE September 19, 1938

SUBJECT SOUTHERN CUSTOMS AND SUPERSTITIONS

1. Date and time of interview September 17, 1938
2. Place of interview Informant's Home
3. Name and address of informant Mr. C. A. Kirshtien [4?] West 93rd St., New York City. Apartment 1-C
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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NEW YORK

FORM B Personal History of Informant

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 228 West 22nd St., New York

DATE September 19, 1938

SUBJECT CUSTOMS AND SUPERSTITIONS

1. Ancestry American
2. Place and date of birth New York
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
New York, Tennessee
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates
7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant

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10. Other Points gained in interview

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 228 West 22nd St., New York City

DATE September 19, 1938

SUBJECT SOUTHERN CUSTOMS AND SUPERSTITIONS

I was born in New York, but spent a good part of my childhood in the South; mother was the grand-daughter of a big plantation owner. All her folks lived in Tennessee, and we spent our summers there.

Mother as a young woman never used make-up. She had a beauty treatment of her own. I remember seeing her tie some oatmeal in a little muslin bag, wet it, and rub her face with it. When it dried, the oatmeal would leave a barely noticeable coating of powder.

To keep her skin white and smooth, she would massage it with fresh cucumber peel every night.

There were several primitive but apparently effective remedies for illness practiced in my mother's family. When we children had a cough, mother would give us boiled water that had been sweetened, with a piece of clean cherry bark floating in it.

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It was believed that to prevent fever for a whole year, a child should pick the first three violets he found in the spring, and eat them. Some of us used to eat violets all summer long, because we got to like the taste of them!

A recipe for Insomnia: Bruise a handful of anise seeds and steep them in waters then place in small bags, and bind one bag over each nostril before going to bed.

There were many superstitions among the Darkies. When you saw a string of red beads around a Pickaninny's neck, you knew it was being worn to prevent nosebleed.

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A strange cure that the Darkies had for headache was to take the revenue stamp from a sack of tobacco and paste it on the forehead. It advertised the fact that the Darkey was suffering from headache, and he would get a lot of sympathy anyway.

As a cure for mumps I have seen a negro rub the oil from a 3¢ can of sardines on his cheeks, and then eat the sardines. The swelling would usually go down, too. Probably the massaging helped.

The Darkies believed that a toothache could be relieved by taking the "stinger" from the tail of a Sting-ray fish, and inserting it into the cavity.

A popular cure for warts, practiced by both blacks and whites, was to gather as many pebbles as you had warts, rub one pebble on each wart, take them to a crossroads and throw the pebbles over your left shoulder. The warts were supposed to go with them.

Of course, there was one always effective way to stop hiccoughs. Just swallow nine gulps of water while standing on one foot.

A common negro cure for corns was this: Procure before breakfast a white feather from the left wing of a chicken. Spit on it and mark a cross over the corn. Throw the feather over

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your shoulder, not looking where it falls. The wind will carry the feather away, and the corn with it.

There was an interesting superstition about curing Yellow Jaundice. And that reminds me of a story I once heard, about an old Darkie who had jaundice very badly. And he sent his wife to find something made of pure gold to place against his body. A piece of gold was supposed to attract the disease away from the patient and draw the yellow color out of his skin.

Well, she finally managed to borrow a gold wedding ring from a white lady. And they let it lie on the sick man's chest for several days. When he got worse instead of better, his wife toted the ring back to its owner, and reproachfully informed her that 'this ring ain't no real pure gold — your husban' done give you a just gold-plate ring!' KNIPE'S CURE: Dr. Knipe was a man known all over Tennessee fifty years ago for his famous “cure for rheumatism”. He was purported to cure the soul as well as the body”, and gave spiritual seances in connection with his medical consultations. For the fee of [\$1.00?], he allowed patients suffering from rheumatism to walk barefoot in the dew of his back yard. The early morning moisture on the grass at Dr. Knipe's place was a guaranteed cure for rheumatic pains. THE PERKIN TRACTOR: Natives of the South claim that the Perkin Tractor, a device similar to the divining rod used to find water, was invented in George Washington's time. The instrument consisted of two metal bars, which, drawn downward over the body of a patient, would indicate the exact location of his disease. The inventor claimed that an upward movement of the tractor would intensify any disease the patient might have.

In order to FATTEN HORSES for a sale, horse traders in Tennessee would give a lean horse arsenic in his feed. This caused the horse to bloat. While fat, he would be sold for a good price. By the time the new owner got him home, the horse would have shrunk again, or if he the dose was too strong, might collapse and die.

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As a cure for a [Fistula?] or a horse's withers, powdered glass bought in a drug store would be poured in the horse's ears ear .

[CELLULOID COLLARS?] are still popular in the South, being thought to have preventive properties for men subject to THROAT AND LUNG disorders.

STIFF NECK: Wrap a pair of underdrawers which have been worn more than two days around the neck.

STOMACH ACHE: Swallow a tablespoonful of clean white sand.

LEG CRAMPS: Before going to bed, place patient's shoes against the wall so that the heels do not touch the floor.

Cure for WARTS: Take a chunk dried mud fallen from a hoof of a mule, and rub it on the wart. Spit on the under side of the chunk, and then place it on a gatepost.

Cure for THRASH: (mouth disease) Draw nine willow twigs through the patient's 4 mouth one at a time. Tie the twigs in abundle and hide them.

Cure for SLEEPWALKING: Cut off a piece of the sleepwalker's nightgown when you find him walking. He will never walk in his sleep again.

EARACHE: Take a piece of cotton, soak in it chloroform and smoke in a clay pipe, blowing the fumes into the ear of the sufferer.

DEATH TEST: To determine whether or not a sick person will die, rub his hand with yeast and let a dog sniff of it. If the dog licks the hand, the person will recover; if the dog refuses to lick his hand, he will die.

SOME NEGRO CURES:

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Cure for COUGH: Shave the head except for a small square patch on top. Tie the hair tightly with a string.

SPASMS: Burn patient's flannel shirt, make a broth of the ashes, and use as medicine.

NEURALGIA: Take a black cord, double it four times, and wear around the wrist.

RHEUMATISM: Catch a fish, blow breath into its mouth, and keep blowing until the fish is dead.

TUMOR: Tie a piece of ram's wool on a string, swallow it four times a day, but keeping hold of the string. When the wool has been used up, the tumor will have disappeared. (There is no virtue in the wool from a lady sheep!)

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NEW YORK FORM D Extra Comment

STATE NEW YORK

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 228 W. 22nd St., New York City

DATE September 19, 1938

SUBJECT SOUTHERN CUSTOMS AND SUPERSTITIONS

Informant was happy in talking about the customs, traditions and superstitions he remembered from his boyhood spent in the South - particularly Tennessee. He has a private collection of some of the customs he saw practiced; states he has often thought

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of publishing them, but “never got around to it.” Speaks deliberately, with a deep-voiced, Southern drawl.

Description: Vigorous build. Close-cropped grey hair, heavy dark brown. Keen intellect. Glad to cooperate with interviewer.